

Earlier this week, I took myself out to Schoolhouse Beach to be near the ocean. It was so breezy out there that once parked on the bluff above the beach, it wasn't easy to open my car door. The waves were large and constant and beautiful, so I did push open the car door and went and stood at the edge of the rocks. As I stood there, buffeted by the roaring gusts of air, I was reminded of the readings for today. The readings that speak to us of the noisy, insistent, essential nature of air, that speak to us of the dangerous or beautiful action that air in motion causes around us and in us.

The prophet Ezekiel tells a fantastical story about a people exiled from their country and their temple. Stricken by mourning, pain, and hopelessness, the Judean exiles are portrayed as a valley filled with dry and lifeless bones. After this past year, many of us can relate to the feeling of exhaustion and grief, when pain and loss make us want to just give up and lie down. But a loving God calls on Ezekiel to prophesy, to call to the bones. A loving God promises to breathe them back into life.

*Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."*

This story is about the crucial nature of air, of breath and spirit. The Hebrew word (ruach) can mean "spirit" (as in God's spirit), "wind," and "breath. It is when the breath of the spirit blows from the four winds that the bones come fully alive. God's love changes them from huddled, crumpled, dry and useless bones, skeletons of what once was, to what is new and alive and vital. Yes, alive again, but not the same as before.

In a reflection entitled "[Dry Bones and the Breath of God,](#)" Episcopal priest Beth Knowlton says,

*"When we are tired to the bone, feeling rather dry...maybe the question the Lord is asking us is, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And we need to hear deeply the prophetic promise that assures us that the very breath of God will enter our tiredness and step by step restore us. It doesn't happen overnight. It is sinews, then flesh, skin, and breath—all leading us to remember again the good gift of life."*

That same Spirit with which God blows life into dead, dry bones is the Spirit that we hear about in today's Gospel reading. Jesus promises his disciples that his ascension – his leaving them again – is the only way that they can receive the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate he will send to them. We can imagine that the disciples weren't thrilled to hear that they must lose Jesus again, but he is clear that there is much for them to learn from the coming of the Spirit.

*"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth..."*

This has to have been quite puzzling to the disciples, but how very like Jesus to give information in a loving riddle. How true to form for him to simultaneously say that he has much to tell them but it won't be him telling them those things. That they will be guided to truth by a mysterious spirit who will arrive...at an equally mysterious time.

And our reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells us that after Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection and then ascension, the disciples are once again huddled and anxious behind closed doors. Sheltering-in...kind of familiar to us this year, right? We hear about the sound of rushing wind filling the house, and about the tongues of fire that appeared around their heads.

All this signified a great event, a visitation of the Holy Spirit in which all present were changed. So changed that they began to speak in other languages. The unifying force of spirit, of wind and fire and language and prophesy all combine in what many consider to be the birth of the Church.

Peter's response to those who think these things can be explained by day drinking, his speech in this reading reminds us that anyone and everyone can be and will be affected by miracles, filled with God's spirit as promised by earlier prophets.

*"I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit..."*

What does this all mean for us, here and now? Other than marveling at the amazing acts of God, what can we do with these Pentecost stories?

I am moved by the following open letter to the church written by ELCA pastor [Sharron R. Blezard](#):

*"This weekend we once again read the story of Ezekiel prophesying to the dry bones of Israel (and to us today) and the story of the first church at Pentecost. It's up to each one of us to decide: Can we leave our petty differences at the door and welcome all people to Christ's table of love and grace? Can we shed the skin of Christian nationalism to become the Church of that first Pentecost? Will we do whatever it takes to ignite the fire in our bellies that will lead to renewal and revival?*

*Finally, are we willing to do the hard work of change and quit trying to spin backward to something that no longer exists? Just what are you willing to do for the sake of Christ and the very good gospel we proclaim? What am I willing to do to welcome the Spirit winds that may take me where I don't really want to go? Who will we be as beloved children of God?"*

I love these questions – even as they make me squirm a bit, they give me hope. These questions remind me that every day I can be moved by the wind, filled with the Spirit and buoyed up. These questions make me wonder what I am to learn about the spirit about life-giving air and breath and wind? They make me realize that much of the last year has been about air, about spirit, about breath.

- We have been changed by the words of Mr. George Floyd: **I can't breathe**. Our viewpoints are changed by the forcible choking off of his and others life breath. Maybe the protests and conflict makes some of us feel a little breathless now, in the way parents of black or brown children hold their breath in fear and dread when an adult child is out of the house too long.
- So many have died of Covid19, gasping for air, desperate for breath as this disease destroys the body's ability to take in and use oxygen. And we know that so many left behind will never breathe easily again.
- We have held our breath, held back our songs. We have masked off the parts of us that bring in and send out air...a strange but loving way to protect one another. Our resistance to the breath of others is in some ways astonishing.
- We who are in areas affected by **wild fires** have learned how fire and smoke affect our breathing and lungs. Now a windy day no longer seems innocuous, but maybe a frightening sign of danger.
- It falls to us to imagine what it is like when Israeli and Palestinian people breathe in the toxic fumes resulting from bombs and burning buildings.

What are we being changed into as we hear stories of breath/air/wind? What shall we do with the life-giving spirit that propels us into a new kind of living?

Recently, Rev. Dr. Yohanna Katanacho wrote an article entitled: [How should followers of Christ respond to the current situation in Israel/Palestine?](#) It is well written and informative, and I commend it to you.

([http://www.comeandsee.com/view.php?sid=1401&fbclid=IwAR1X7hgbcKICTMtUZE\\_R6vtCGwLYvmv1rKoAcXOexz9jYCsxDyAlmn6EFps](http://www.comeandsee.com/view.php?sid=1401&fbclid=IwAR1X7hgbcKICTMtUZE_R6vtCGwLYvmv1rKoAcXOexz9jYCsxDyAlmn6EFps))

At the end of the article, Dr. Yohanna makes several suggestions about possible actions, and I was struck by how each one can work for the several crises we face right now – racial inequity, covid 19 and its attendant political fallout, wildfires and the horrific bombings and killings in Palestine-Israel. He suggests, among several others, the following:

- Pray.
- Weep with those who are weeping.
- Stand with the oppressed in peaceful ways.
- Reflect on long term solutions and empower the leaders who can deliver such solutions.
- Bless, pray, and do good to those who are different from you.
- Listen and be humble.

Standing with those injured in the Middle East, St. Stephen's has more than once sent money to Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza. This parish prays and stands with and weeps with and tries to listen and be humble. We can move forward doing those very things, and we can lean into long term solutions. We can take care of ourselves as well as those around us, so that this community can continue spreading the Good News of God's love. As Church, we have spent more than a year physically apart. We have stretched our meager skills in technology, bolstered our friends and family in belief that we can and will and must worship without touching or sharing food or space or communion wine. As we prepare to regather and worship in person, what more can we do?

- Our response to our priests, our church leaders, who have found ways to lead liturgy without touching or breathing on anyone, can move beyond admiration and into genuine support and collaboration.
- We can regather with changed awareness, not just waiting until things are 'normal' but perhaps accepting new ways.
- We can attend to one another as we regather, noticing possible dry bones of burnout, of loneliness, of division over Covid.
- We can rest sometimes, but resist the lure of permanently turning away from racial inequity, homelessness and other social griefs.
- We can turn into the blowing wind of Truth, instead of away from it, and welcome the rushing sounds of changing awareness and shared language.

**(Part of) Prayer of Confession by Teri Peterson**

We hear, and dismiss, your deeds of power, your call to love those who are different, your insistence that the whole world be included.

You pour out your Spirit, and we squash the vision—it is too big, too unrealistic, too uncertain, too unruly.

You send visions of a future with hope, and we look back instead.

You **light** the way, and we look for a fire extinguisher, trying to keep ourselves (and you!) safe.

Forgive us, O God. We long for your new life, but we do not know how to live it.

Rush into this place again, and fill every nook and cranny with dreams and visions of possibility.

Turn our hushed whispers into proclamations of your grace, in every language of the world.

Lead us out into your future.

Amen.